

ISSUES FOR CONGRESSIONAL CONSIDERATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Cops and prosecutors know it. Business leaders and teachers see it. Brain scientists and economists have proven it: when children participate in high quality early learning programs in the first five years of life, they do better in school, get higher-paying jobs, rely less on social programs, and contribute more to the economy.

States and communities across the country are acting on this knowledge, but they need help to strengthen and expand their programs to reach more children, more effectively. It's time for Congress to enter this national conversation and to partner with states and communities to support the kind of early care and education programs that produce results.

As Congress considers expanded investments in voluntary, high quality early learning opportunities – including preschool, child care and home visiting – they should be doing so with an eye towards helping many states do more to expand on their strong investments in high quality programs that help kids and supporting other interested states to ensure their youngest children have access to programs that work. Congress should focus on the following key elements:

- **Build on state progress.** *Federal legislation should support state and community programs that produce results, and expand access for children who currently don't benefit from programs that work. Federal legislation should not upend state systems, but rather help states strengthen and extend them.*
 - Recognizing that “early learning” encompasses many different programs and funding streams that have traditionally been housed in different agencies, states have developed innovative governance models to deliver effective, efficient services. In **Connecticut**, five state agencies – the Departments of Children and Families, Education, Higher Education, Public Health, and Social Services – collaborate on early childhood projects. In **Nebraska**, the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services co-lead the state's early intervention program. In **Washington**, the governor-established State Department of Early Learning serves as a cabinet-level state agency for initiatives previously scattered across several departments. **Georgia** has a stand-alone agency, the Department of Early Care and Learning (Bright from the Start) responsible for the state's early child care and early education.
- **Leverage existing community resources.** *Parents need a variety of options that work for them. One size just doesn't fit all. Any preschool provider – schools, Head Start, and community child care — both non-profit and for profit — that can meet robust quality standards should be an eligible provider.*
 - The **Kansas Early Childhood Block Grant** is a birth-to-five funding stream that supports a mixed delivery system. Applicants demonstrate that they will meet local need and can be home visiting programs, high-quality center- or home-based child care providers, or preschool programs for three- or four-year-olds. A minimum of 30 percent of funds are set aside for infants and toddlers. Programs must demonstrate how their program implements research-based practices and meet standards targeted toward improving outcomes for at-risk children. Programs are encouraged to partner with Head Start, Early Head Start, child care, and preschool providers.
 - Since 2000, **Maryland** has provided supplemental funds to Early Head Start programs to extend the day or year for EHS children through partnerships with child care centers. The initiative provides an average of four additional hours of care a day for children enrolled in the partnership in their child care setting.

- **Serve the children most in need.** Many upper income parents are able to provide preschool for their young children. The highest public return on investment comes from supporting families who can't pay for preschool themselves, and whose children are more likely to experience low quality, non-educational care. *Low and middle-income families up to 200% of poverty should be first in line to enroll their kids in voluntary preschool.*
 - o The **Pennsylvania** Office of Child Development and Early Learning completes an annual "Risk and Reach" report that provides information about how well the Commonwealth is reaching its young children with quality early learning services, with special attention to at-risk children. This report includes an analysis of economic, maternal, birth outcome, academic and toxic stress factors; compiles information on the number of children served through OCDEL programs, shows the funding allocation levels for early childhood programs supported by state and federal investments; and identifies counties and cities most likely to benefit from early childhood investments, based on these risk factors. The data is used to track progress in reaching all children who can benefit from early education, help communities better understand their early childhood programming needs, and inform future decisions regarding early childhood education policies and practices.
 - o Some states have created their own innovative financing mechanisms and service delivery models to reach the most vulnerable children. **Nebraska's** Early Childhood Education Endowment ("Sixpence") provides a stable, protected revenue source for quality early childhood programs serving at-risk children ages birth to three years. Sixpence is a public-private partnership established as a constitutional amendment that redefined the definition of the "common school" to include early childhood education, beginning as early as birth and established an early childhood education endowment fund of \$60 million.
- **Give states the flexibility to serve children from birth to five.** Research shows that one year of intervention at age four is great but not fully enough to close educational and developmental gaps that have grown over the course of a child's lifetime. Many states recognize that results are better when children have at least two – and ideally five – years of high quality education and care. The earlier you start, the better the outcome. *States should have the option to use some of these resources to provide voluntary, high quality programs to the most at-risk children beginning at birth.*
 - o 28 states currently include three-year-olds in their existing preschool programs.
 - o A number of states, including Kansas, Illinois, Nebraska, and Oklahoma, have developed innovative financing structures to allow them to make significant investments in high-quality programs for infants and toddlers.
 - o Other states are building on the strengths of existing federal funding streams. During a special session called in February 2010, the **Oregon** State Legislature allocated \$1 million in state general revenue to Early Head Start. The decision to expand EHS was made in the midst of discussions over how to fill a \$185 million hole in the state budget. State EHS funding was added to all federally funded EHS programs, including Tribal EHS programs, to expand the number of children they could serve.
- **Facilitate high quality.** We know what generates strong child outcomes and reduces later government funding: well-trained teachers, small group sizes, full school day, comprehensive services and parent engagement. *State standards that promote quality, and effective implementation, should be required for federal funding, with appropriate time and resources provided to meet these Congressionally-established quality thresholds.*
 - o In the **Illinois Early Childhood Block Grant**, twenty percent of all funding increases for the infant-toddler set-aside are to be used for "quality enhancements," including training, technical assistance, scholarships for infant-toddler teachers, and mental health consultation to infant-toddler programs that receive Block Grant funding.
 - o In **Oklahoma**, state general revenue funds support training for child care providers to help them meet higher levels of quality standards. Child care programs receive funding, training, and technical assistance to meet Early Head Start standards. Programs also receive training in assessment, program planning, and environmental rating scales.